

# Avantopia

with

# DUMMIES!

**Must-have , Insider's advice**  
for Normal visitors to Avantopia,  
one of the world's biggest  
exporters of *strange experiences!*

Kinda short, kinda reductive,  
kinda opinionated **run-downs**  
on Avant-Garde customs!

Don't attend an **Avant-Festival**  
without it!

**Quick Guides** on how to enjoy  
avant-garde **STUFF** of all kinds!



**Your #1 Travel Guide to the World Capital of Weird!**  
by Olchar E. Lindsann

for Terri  
& Scott **Lennard**

*AfterMAF 2019 edition*

Front cover image: C. Mehrl Bennett at the Marginal Arts Parade,  
Roanoke, Virginia.

# Contents

## **Part I: Introduction**

So You're Going to Avantopia!	2
Just What <i>Is</i> the Avant-Garde?	3
Anti-This 'n Anti- That	4
Festivals and Anti-Festivals	5

## **Part II: Avant-Society**

Avantopian Community and the Individual	7
Avantopian Family	9
Avantopian Ethics & Morality	10
Avantopian Politics & Anti-Governance	12
Avantopian Economics	14
Avantopian Theology and Religion	16
“Art” and Avantopia	19

## **Part III: Surviving an Avant-Festival**

Dance	21
Music & Noise	22
Free Improvisation	22
Noise <del>Music</del>	23
Poetry	26
Performance <del>Art</del>	28
Visual <del>Art</del> Objects	28
Conversation	29

## So You're Going to Avantopia!

If you're holding this book, it means you've somehow been strong-armed, misled, or tricked into visiting that mysterious and fabulously foreign country known as Avantopia, the realm of the avant-garde. If you're like most travelers, you'll be visiting during one of the many Avantopian festivals – when the country's widely-scattered citizens gather together and celebrate their most outlandish traditions. I have dual citizenship and am familiar with normalcy too, so I've drawn up this simple guide to help you get the most from your visit.

When most people hear “avant-garde” they think of a lot of things – crazy, often scandalous, often unsettling, usually absurd actions, drawings, words and sounds that *claim* to be Art but, well, don't really seem like it. Most of these things are not untrue – you'll run into them all on your journey. However, the *reasons* most people associate – Freaking-out the Man, “must be on drugs”, pretensions of cooler/smarter-than-thou – are usually wrong.

If you think this doesn't sound/look/feel like art/music/poetry/dance, you're actually not wrong; at best, they're only *kind of* art/music/poetry/dance. Here's the thing: they're not usually *trying* to be art/music/poetry/dance. We call them that so we can call them something; but the avant-garde is after something other Art, something for which there is no name, and never can be.

**So forget Art. The avant-garde is not a kind of art. It's a Subculture.**

When you embark upon a journey to an avant-garde festival worth its salt, you're not going to an Art Show. You're visiting a different culture, a different country, that exists almost invisibly in the same place as the country and culture you know. We'll call it **Avantopia**, because I find that kinda funny. And for simplicity's sake, let's call where you're from the country of **Normalcy**. It's a very popular place, and nice to visit; believe it or not, I grew up there. But I moved away.

When you visit another country, you celebrate the customs and lifestyles that seem so foreign. So this travel brochure's a brief primer on the strange, unfamiliar culture of Avantopia: may your journey be filled with delicious confusion!

## Just What *Is* the Avant-Garde?

As mentioned, most people (even artists) think of the avant-garde as “weird art”. (Many of those people will go on to say it’s “dead”, an odd thing to declare of a thriving international subculture involving thousands of people.) But it is something much more specific than that, and the “art” is just a disguise for something else at most, a side-product at least. It’s as if somebody said, “Who are the Amish?” and your answer was: “Nicely-carved chairs. They’re extinct.”

The Avant-Garde is a *community* and a *tradition*. Most avant-gardists are not “normal” people in their “real lives”, who happen to make very strange products. Nor are they *basically* normal, but with more unusual *tastes*. It’s a community of people committed to a total lifestyle and a complete way of thinking that is different from what is “normal”. For many, life in the midst of Normalcy would be, or had been, unbearable without this community and the practices that bind it together. This lifestyle is vastly different from the normal on a very deep level; when avantopians make “art”, it is serving specific functions within that community, as well as whatever it may do or say or look like to the rest of the world. Often, it’s an intenser version of something that is part of their daily life or way of thinking, or a way to kick-start a new quest.

One difference between Avantopia and a *literally* different country is that it’s a culture that its members have *chosen*, not been born into. This can be very tricky and confusing, because everybody in the avant-garde has dual-citizenship; one minute you could almost think we live and think like Americans, Chileans, Moroccans, Belgians (let’s say: normal people) or whatever, and the next minute the Avantopian behavior takes over. But not only does this keep things interesting, it means that spending even a little time in Avantopia – a few hours or a few days – can help you look back on Real Life not *only* from outside, like any other country, but from a *different kind of inside*. Avantopia is a bizarro, alternate version of Normative culture; it is what we might have been, and could become.

=>So here's your first set of advice on enjoying Avantopia:

Don't assume that something making you uncomfortable is *about* making you uncomfortable; maybe it's just different. If it *is* meant to make you uncomfortable, don't assume it's aggression – it's probably tough love. In Avantopia, challenging a person's expectations or comfort in festive situations is considered a gesture of respect and generosity. And keep this in mind: for many avant-gardists, a trip to the supermarket, bank, or TGI Fridays feels just as disorienting and incomprehensible.

Nothing is *about* being weird, but that doesn't mean it's a secret code. Again, you're just not used to it – Normal culture allows far fewer ideas, sounds, images, and ways of moving and speaking than Avantopia, and it may take some getting used to. Usually, *meaning* is less important than the *experience* – if you're experiencing the weirdness, feeling its effects, thinking about those feelings, thinking about those thoughts, thinking about everybody else in the room and all the crazy events that had to happen in the world to bring you and them together at the moment doing this weird, ridiculous thing—then you're probably “getting it” just fine. No tricks.

## Anti- This'n Anti- That

You may see the word “Anti-“ a lot (especially in anything I'm involved with) – if nothing else, the word “Anti-Art”. Often, this doesn't exactly mean “Against” or “Not”. I've mentioned that, “Avantopia is a bizarro, alternate version of Mainstream culture; it is what we might have been, and could become.” If so, then most aspects of Normative culture need to be re-thought: not gotten rid of, but stripped down of all the specifics (even the ones we're used to thinking of as inherent) until we reach the most basic idea or need – and then *re-invented* from the ground up. When a part of culture or society has been rethought as something that *seems* very different or opposed but is *actually* a re-invented version of it, we may say it is “Anti-” whatever.

## Festivals and Anti-Festivals

All festivals serve many functions for many people of course, but there are two traditional types:

The first is the religious or civic festival (Mardi Gras, Easter, the Superbowl, etc.), where everybody is coming together to mark a communal event or create a communal experience for all to share. There are usually repeated traditions (songs, games, costumes, stories, parades, etc.), and often a lot of unpredictability and individuality built into the traditions (for instance Mardi Gras costumes and floats). Many people are given various roles that interact, and sometimes certain ones may be “out-in-front” playing/chanting/etc. while others play more passive roles, but it’s all about the shared experience of the world working differently for all of us for a certain time.

There are also art/music/literary festivals, which give certain people platforms to do something unique for an audience. Most of them are focused on artists/musicians/poets/etc. showing off their work to as many people as they convince; making a bit money’s often a goal too (or at least breaking even), and larger audiences mean more status, and the more “legitimate” the work is therefore supposed to be. Most festivals are juried, don’t take community and collaborative histories of participants into account, and change their whole line-up each year.

Most Avantopian festivals combine these two. AfterMAF looks at first glance like an arts festival (with especially strange content, maybe), but its goals are closer to the first: it’s an (Anti-)Civic and (Anti-)Religious festival of Avantopian society. At times it’s been likened to a family reunion, a utopian experiment, a ceremonial event. It is intentionally small, because we like intimacy more than fame or status, and because we want to share what we love with a few others who also love it, not “freak out” strangers; over half of our contributors return year after year, and all collaborate in some way with some of the others, and so we build our personal and creative relationships with each other over the years; at AfterMAF there are traditions such as Stool Sample, Collab Fest, Junk Installations, Anti-Mass, and

Breaking Shit at the End which gather more meaning to each of us every year; and the focus is as much on the conversations and relationships that are built in-between “performances” as about the performances themselves.

So if you’re visiting Avantopia during an Anti-Festival, be prepared to be unprepared. You’ll be seeing Avantopia at its most intense, transgressive, disorienting, and unapologetic – but also at its most welcoming, joyous, sacred, and transformative. Remember that people often do things as part of festivals they wouldn’t do otherwise: the Running of the Bulls, Fasting, Speaking in Tongues, playing dangerous games, dressing in ways they otherwise wouldn’t, or virtually anything that happens at Mardi-Gras. It’s the best time to visit.

Since an Anti-Fest is focused on the communal experience rather than the artistic, AfterMAF is a little uncomfortable with the words “performers” (or “artists”) and “audience”. True, some of us clearly play roles doing complicated things while other people watch us. But that can also be said of a political rally, a church service, a classroom, a funeral, a bingo game, and many other situations where *everybody* is clearly essential for what’s happening. The people “in front” in Avantopian Anti-Festivals are often playing roles similar to those of priests, energy-conductors, teachers, bards, game-players, etc. in Normative society. Those who aren’t “performing” are just as much a part of what’s happening, even if their roles are less obvious or concentrated.

That’s why, although the conventional words still slip in sometimes out of habit, we prefer “Contributors” to “Performers” and “Guests” to “Audience”. Those words better describe our respective roles – which also change every time a new contributor becomes the focus of the event, and when “guests” end up “contributing” to situations set up by the “contributors” . . .



# Avant-Society

In this section, we'll look at the main aspects of Avantopian society. Remember that this is just a basic primer, written from just one perspective i a wildly heterogeneous society; *I don't speak for all Avantopiana!* But it will help navigate this wondrously strange land.



A Dada Feast around 1922

## Avantopian Community and the Individual

One of the most distinguishing traits of Avantopia: it's communal identity is not defined by *common similarities*, but by ways of experiencing & activating *difference* as a communal experience. Unlike in Normalcy, difference, not similarity is the glue that holds Avantopia's society together. This doesn't just mean a difference in opinion – in fact, you can name plenty of *opinions* most Avantopians

share, but the roles and effects of those opinions are massively diverse. The difference that Avantopians value is a fundamental difference in *how* one thinks, acts in daily life, and relates to the world around them on a psychological, emotional, cognitive, conceptual level.

at first it might seem like Avantopian society has little to unite it except being different from Normalcy. In part, this is because any time we enter an unfamiliar culture, what sticks out is what's most different from what we're used to; in part, it's also because Avantopian society values traditions of *re-invention* over traditions of *repetition*, unlike Normative society. The community is constantly fluid and evolving, but remembers its past and keeps revisiting it in a different way each time. To fully understand h individualism and community merge in Avantopia, you need to look past the changes and differences on the surface, find the ethics and commitments that unite and underlie them.

Many of the customs and social forms of Avantopia have developed to facilitate this combination of extreme individuality and community, such as Collaboration, which structures many of its most important traditions and usually involves each collaborator to give up much more control than in Normative artistic collaborations. A lot of Avantopian correspondence (often called called Mail Art) is collaborative, with each correspondent giving up control of the collaboration itself, who will be added to it, and whether they will ever see the finished product. In its festivals, the Performances provide spaces for individuals to contribute their uniqueness to the community in concentrated form, and then the performer-contributor blends back into the community and becomes a guest, listening to another form of strangeness. Many performances blend and erase the borders between all these distinctions.

## Avantopian Family

There are many intersecting forms of family in Avantopia. First of course is the inherited family, such as we have in Normalcy: parents, siblings, cousins, uncles, aunts. They are the people who know our origins best, and how we've come to where we are. They are often people who ended up far different than us, and are windows onto the world of Normalcy and keep us open to ideas and lifestyles outside of Avantopia. For many Avantopians they're eventually the main link remaining to Normative society, and thus the "normal" family becomes the biggest point of *difference* in their lives.

Then there are one's intentional families: Avantopians and others that one collaborates, corresponds, performs, exhibits or trades with. They are the people who best understand the paths we've ended up making, and the experience of reprogramming ourselves. They're often people who started out even *more* different from us than they are now, and bring with them perspectives and influences that affect us without our even realising it. These aren't usually *called* "families" – depending on the specifics they're usually called movements, groups, networks, bands, or cenacles.

Since all of them intersect somehow to make up Avantopia, there's a sense that everyone in avant-society is part of a large, very extended family. In some ways, this is similar to Clans and Tribes in other societies: like them, it focuses us on our links and a sense of duty toward people we don't know very well, even when we might have disagreements or not particularly get along ("...but he's still my uncle..."), and therefore extends our understanding of difference. But it (usually) rejects aspects of tribal thinking that lead to insularity, elitism, and conflict.

An Avantopian Festival is, in one aspect, an Anti-Family Reunion, in which nearly everybody is the weird aunt or uncle.

## Avantopian Ethics & Morality

At first glance Avantopia can seem to be a bed of immorality and hedonism, and surely that's true according to *some* people's notions, but just as in everything else, that idea of the Anti- is all over the place. The language that is used in Normalcy to *discuss* the sacred no longer seem to work even for most Normal people anymore, let alone Avantopians. So what seems blasphemous *in form* to Normative eyes is often actually sacred in its *essence* or intent. And remember that satire can be a kind of loving criticism, not always condemnation, and lets you look back on Normalcy from a Mostly-Outside that understands it inside and out.

I've mentioned that "In Avantopia, challenging a person's expectations or comfort in festive situations is considered a gesture of respect and generosity." This morality of challenge means that much of Avantopian life – especially at festivals – is passed through layers of irony – not dismissive *sarcasm*, but the kind of indirect approach you need to re-think something so ingrained you can't get at it directly. Only on the edge of transgression can morality be really thought about, because then it's not just an idea anymore, it's become a choice again.

That means that what a poem, sculpture, or piece of music is "about" (if anything) is often less important than the social situation it's helping to occur. And, keep in mind that choosing to devote your life to being an Avantopian citizen and performing your arse off for a dozen people and no money *is already* saying a lot about one's ethical commitments.

One of the most important aspects of Avantopian ethics is to constantly separate the core of morality from the conventional forms that usually come to "stand for" it rather than embody it in Normative society. Less politeness, more respect. This means there's only a faint concept of profanity that isn't tied to hate or cruelty (Every single English swear-word derives from the Saxon language of the peasantry, while the "allowed" word for it comes from the aristocratic French. The concept of profanity is inherently elitist) and that in Festive situations, nudity isn't necessarily associated with sexuality (especially among

dancers) and is much less taboo than in Normal society. When it does have a sexual element, it is assumed that all present are (as Avantopians typically are) mature, respectful adults who are capable of thinking about what is being done, and not treating it like erotica; discussing sexuality, even in a theatrical way, doesn't imply promiscuity. Mild intoxicants like alcohol and weed are often present among guests at festivals but rarely play an important role.

Remember when you visit that Avantopia, like all countries, has its own ways that would make you uncomfortable back home, and you can see through what you could find "offensive" and instead remember that if it's uncomfortable for *you* just to see it, this performer had to face this same reaction inside themselves, and they kept pushing. Ask yourself: why? Whatever they're doing will become more interesting to you, even if you don't come up with an answer.



Vienna Aktionists, early 1960s

## Avantopian Politics & Anti-Governance

Avantopia is not a nation, it is not a state. It has no territory of its own, and there is nothing in the world that it controls. It has no official existence, let alone relations, with any other country on earth. By the same token, there's nobody who is in charge "inside" its "borders" either; but of course, there are no borders to Avantopia – all of us here are undocumented citizens. Since all Avantopians are under the authority of the normative, national political powers where they live, Avantopian politics is constrained to addressing only the aspects of social life that are not controlled by them.

Because there is no central or even federated government in Avantopia, it functions as a direct democracy – not of votes, but of action. Certain groups of Avantopians (see **Family**) press their competing agendas on both domestic issues (what the avant-garde should be and do) and external affairs (how to relate to the Normal world and important events) not through legislation, but through simply trying to expend more energy than their opponents, and convince others to change their behaviour. This can take the form of published manifestos, blogs, pamphlets and books, lyrics, and communal events, and sometimes involves exploiting Normative resources by pretending especially hard to *be* Art or claiming some authority or representation of other Avantopians when talking to Normal arts organizers – though this latter is generally frowned upon. Avantopia has traditionally had a lot of inner strife, but over the past 75 years internal fighting has largely died out and the various political factions have more intersections, less friction, and more cooperation.

In a normative republic, politics are focused on Opinions (stating and spreading them) and Governance (The institutional aspects of society). Once others agree with your Opinion, they will affect the nature of Governance, which will trickle down to change people's lives. Political action means taking or using state power to quickly but impersonally affect millions or billions of people. To somebody used to Normative politics, the only the aspects of Avant-politics that are easily

visible are the bits and pieces where the opinions it deals with come up. Since institutional power tends to resist unpredictable change, that means that “avant-politics” can look like normal Liberals spouting off opinions amidst a flurry of nonsense.

These are just a few elements of avant-political action though, because avant-politics take many, less obvious forms.

Avantopian politics are focused on experimentation of Thought (the interior life) and Lifestyle (thought out-in-the-world). Experimentation causes new ways of thinking and living, which will percolate up to eventually change governance. Political action within Avantopia means directly utilizing our resources of human generosity and curiosity to affect a few dozen or hundred or thousand people’s lives in immediate and personal ways, who will gradually adapt and spread these strategies for living to more and more people, in more and more new forms. From the Avantopian perspective, avant-politics consists of a diverse array of nonviolent radicals seeking and trying out intimate political *solutions*, more than *opinions*.

Avantopia operates on *codes* rather than *laws*: there are ethical codes of behaviour that are expected and understood, but each action is judged situationally with direct reference to the ethical question itself, not to an abstract rule inherently applicable in every situation. (There are certainly actions which *will* be condemned in all situations, but that’s decided when each occurs, not beforehand.) There are no authorities to enforce them, no police or judges or jailers to turn those Codes into Laws, so punishments arise directly from the reactions and ethical codes of each member of the community. For this reason, by far the most common punishment in Avantopia is exclusion from the community – banished and returned to the world of Normalcy. This exclusion happens *by mutual consent*, to the extent of that members participate. If half of Avantopia condemns a behaviour, one is half-excluded; if 98% condemn it, one is that much alone.

## Avantopian Economics

When things are exchanged, their value can come from direct *use value* (the thing itself has a real, direct function in someone's life) or from indirect *exchange value* (the thing abstractly "stands for" being valuable, its value comes from being able to buy or get other things with it). Exchange Value only exists because the thing is meant to be gotten rid of – the value is never really in the thing being exchanged. Because of this, modern Normative economics (based on Exchange Value) can't serve as vehicles for ethics, community, or interpersonal relationships. The economy therefore spreads alienation and tends to promote hierarchy and oppression.

That's why the Avantopian gift-economy is based on Use Value instead: in Avantopia, the goal of economics is not the circulation of Exchange Value (money) but the circulation of *valuable* joyous objects, ideas, and experiences. In this way, avant-garde poems, songs, performances, drawings, dances, etc. serve roles analogous to that of money in Normalcy – but their value is being *experienced* (used), not spent. Potlatch is a favourite model for Avantopian gatherings; bartering and pay-what-you-can are common responses to the demands of the normative economy. Avantopians prefer to give or trade these things with each other when possible, rather than use Normal currency, but since Avantopia has no center of power (see **Politics**) it must interact with the Normative economy; it has no choice but to be economically parasitic. When Avantopians are forced to seek money, they trade it for things with use-value (albums, books, prints, shirts, stickers) which they've made themselves, are designed to express ideas or solidarity to the recipient – use value.

There are constant debates between various Avantopian factions about how much, and which ways, it's acceptable to compromise with the more powerful Normative Empire in order to gain access to its much greater resources. Many Avantopians (including yours truly) adhere closely to the "DIY ethic" (Do-It-Yourself) of refusing most or all support from Normative institutions, even when they seem well-



meaning. They argue that in order to apply for the (market-value) money these institutions offer, you must subject yourselves to a ritual of bureaucratic and objectifying alienation that poisons a community from the inside. Better a “poor” community where each makes small sacrifices for love of all, than a “prosperous” one which must prove itself “viable” according to *any* alienated standard to maintain itself. Others argue that the hoarded and wasteful resources of Normalcy are illegitimate, and that tricking their institutions into funding our resistance is turn-about-as-fair-play, guerrilla war against an overwhelmingly power colonizer.

The result is that many of Avantopia’s great civic festivals have absolutely no government or philanthropic funding, have no official or “non-profit” status, have no commercial sponsorship, and yet remain free for all, aside from the financial restraints imposed on each by their Normative dual citizenship. Most venues for performances of all kinds are warehouse spaces, bookstores, and people’s basements; most journals and books are photocopier-produced chapbooks or zines, or online; galleries are hard to come by, but collaboration with edgy-Normative nonprofit spaces can work.



Broken Piano being Ritually destroyed, Marginal Arts Festival

## Avantopian Theology & Religion

To most visitors, Avantopian religion first appears atheist or often blasphemous. In fact, it's remarkably diverse, and almost totally un-institutional (usually it does not get *called* religion) – but quite deep. Theology is one of the areas of Avantopian culture where the concept of the **Anti-** plays the strongest role, so keep it constantly in mind. It can only be briefly touched on in this little travel-guide.

Despite or because of its extreme religious diversity, in which almost no two citizens fully agree, relations are remarkably harmonious. There are certainly plenty of materialist atheists (the only major homogeneous group), and some representatives of all the Normative religions, though they usually explore more esoteric or eccentric paths within them. Many could be described as a-Theists, or non-materialist atheists; seeking the *sacred* but refusing *belief*. It's here where the Anti- comes in, and since this wide catch-all includes the theologies most unique to Avantopia and foreign to Normalcy, I'll concentrate on that.

Most Normal religions, especially those most prevalent today, are Revealed Religions – a single Truth has been Revealed to a religious authority or deity, and it answers all questions, puts them to an end. The focus is on *belief* and *beliefs*; morality is handed down in the form of Laws; and the individual's calling is to agree and conform with that Truth, through the Law.

But even within all the Revealed Religions, there are other paths of Mysticism – where Truth is something unknowable, and must be pursued anew by every individual. The focus is on *experience* and *consciousness*; morality is inseparable from the specificity of every situation according to social *codes* (see **Ethics**); and the individual's calling is to seek the sacred endlessly, re-inventing oneself as if in a chrysalis. A lot of Avantopian theology is a kind of a-Theist mysticism, exploring the experience of the sacred when it's separated from its usual forms. Most of it is very personal – usually, each citizen tailors their own system drawing on many others, and constantly evolves it.

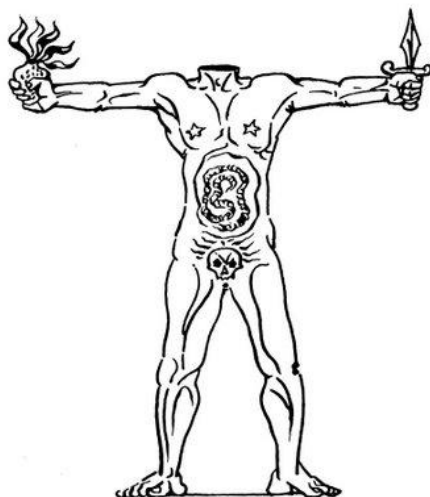
Since it's impossible to say nearly anything true of all Avantopian religion, here are a few of the most common traits to look for:

***Shamanism e³ Trance:*** All religions aim at changing consciousness; this core goal is what links Avantopian Anti-theology (even when atheist) to Normative religions. Many Avantopian objects (you can call them paintings and sculptures) are meditative objects, both for the maker and viewer. On some level, most avant-garde performances and object-making practices involve this goal in some way, and it's often the motivating factor. At a certain point, the consciousness acting in the performer no longer experiences the event as "themselves" – something that many religions call prophetic consciousness, or sometimes speaking in tongues. (see **Sound Poetry**) When they approach Sacred Taboos, they are no longer "themselves" but living symbols. Many Avantopians think of what they do as related to Shamanism, in which the shaman's consciousness enters, transforms, or merges with what some call the spirit-world but others call the Unconscious. Collaboration is a form of communal trance, and when improvised those consciousnesses are merged on a level that's deeper and quicker than intentional decision-making.

***Performance as Ritual:*** In particularly intense performances, the "weird" disorienting actions, props, and situations serve the same functions as the meditation, rituals, ritual objects, and ceremonies in Normative religions. The difference is that in Avantopia rituals are usually designed anew each time, responsive to their situations and able to evolve. As in any other ritual, although the priest or performer is the conduit of the collective experience, the state of trance or otherness is shared by the entire group. Just as every religion involves sacrifices of some kind, so too do many avant-rituals, whether in the form of breaking objects, making messes, breaking taboos, breaking laws, or taking social, emotional, and physical risks. (The economy of *giving* also involves this sacred sacrifice for the community – see **Economics**.) The use of ambient and repetitive noises, actions, refrains, lighting tricks, etc. is often used to induce meditative and semi-trance like states in the guests of a performance.

**Magic:** Nobody (well, almost) in Avantopia expects to magically teleport you through space or put a hex on you or tell the future; but many do suspect that many of the *techniques* developed as part of Magic over the millennia can be used to develop a craft of thinking to make one more effective in the world. Avantopian magic, then, is a matter of hyper-awareness of the psychological and social meanings and possibilities of a given situation or action; and then, of subliminally “nudging” the flow of events in the direction you want it to go. It’s a system of techniques for bringing the Unconscious into social reality, in a spiritually fulfilling way.

**Communal Ecstasy:** Nearly all religions claim Ecstasy as their goal: the moment where the individual merges, at least partly, with the Sacred. In most of them, Festivals are the format in which the whole community experiences this merging *out of* their humdrum lives and into *each other* and a sense of something beyond understanding or logic. Avantopian Anti-Festivals (See **Anti-Festivals**) are built around this goal, designed not to *force* these moments when everybody goes crazy together (because you can’t plan them), but to set up all the right conditions to *invite it*. Not unlike a Greek priestess invoking the visit of a deity...



Symbol of the Headless God for the Acéphale group, c. 1936

## “Art” and Avantopia

You’re likely to hear two slogans in Avantopia that sound contradictory: “Everything is Art” and “Destroy Art”. Both come to the same thing in the end: the idea’s that the deepest potential of the *things people do* under the name of Art is enchained or perverted by being restricted to “Art” instead of applying their energies to all of human life as well. Whether Art is a part of everything or the name’s chucked out the window and left for dead (as some Avantopians have already done), it comes to the same thing. But no half-measures.

That’s why a very large proportion of Avantopian culture identifies with the term “Anti-Art” or something similar. This is because “Art” (or literature, music, etc.) is the aspect of Normative life that’s closest to much of what happens in Avantopia, and for that reason it’s often the route that people *took* to Avantopia in the first place. Many Avantopians still use the terms music, dance, art, and poetry but they mean something different by it than Normal artists. This is why travelers are often so confused, disappointed, or even angry or frightened when expecting simply a “weird” version of Normal Art.

From a Normal person with normal expectations, Art is made either to A.) Entertain people B.) Buy, invest in, and either sell again when the market rises or use to show off how hip you are, or C.) Convey a message or meaning. This last one is *closer* to Avantopian goals, but *not* quite the same.

Avant-Garde stuff A.) only entertains once you let go of your expectations. B.) is *not* trendy or good investment, and if it’s hip, it’s probably merely *weird*... It’s often explicitly not for sale (see **Economics**) and C.) meanings may play a role, but the work is more concerned with creating *a moment* of experience, which stands out from the flow of life and will create eddies of thought and feeling as you return to that flow.

In Normal society, it’s generally agreed on by everyone from parents to psychologists to teachers to sociologists to children that imaginative *play* is one of the most important factors in developing

critical thought self-identity, adaptability and resilience. Paradoxically, It's also made almost totally taboo as soon as people are old enough and experienced enough to be able to *fully* utilize those benefits; to Avantopians, this seems ludicrous. The exception is games, which do allow for play and which are great, for sure, but still constrain play within a system of rules and (aside from RPGs) competition and a pre-designated goal. In Avantopia, play does not *end* with childhood but becomes conscious, focused, intensified, and intentionally learned from. Most Avantopian culture can be looked at from this angle.

So you might think of "Art" as a kind of mask that Avantopians use to help Normalcy understand categories of cultural practice that *Normalcy doesn't have*. Therefore, the names "Art", "Poetry", "Dance" etc. are used for *new* re-combinations of skills and ideas from many different categories of Normative life.

Whether paintings, texts, or performances, most Avantopian productions aren't about *meaning*, but the *effect* produced. Think about music with no lyrics; most people don't get angry and call Beethoven an idiot because his symphonies don't get a clear meaning across. Yet as soon as words or images get involved, the frustration starts. (This analogy gets complicated with avant-garde music: see that section.)

The best advice for approaching Avant-garde "art": Don't expect anything, including resolution; you're embarking on an *adventure* every time. Even if you hate it – it *was* an adventure. Think of the "strange" parts as if they were normal but unfamiliar, remembering that for some people (even though Avantopia is a very tiny country) this *is* what "makes sense", and the Normal world that gives you comfort makes them crawl out of their skin. And remember that they *still* live in Normality almost every day of their lives. By the same token, try to think of "normal" parts of the work (if there are any!) as if they *were* strange; because if they're still being used by an Avantopian, there's a good chance there's something equally strange about what seems normal, if we can de-familiarize ourselves.

Go with the flow, and you'll be fine.

# Surviving an Avant-Festival!

As explained in the last chapter, when visiting an Avantopian festival, you'll inevitably be experiencing poetry, music, art, dance, and other things that don't really line up with what those things mean in Normalcy. In fact, sometimes it can be hard to tell them apart, because what you're experiencing seems equally far from *any* name you could put on it. So this section provides a brief guide on how to get the most from the experience.

## Dance

When Normal people hear "dance", they usually expect one of two things: A.) A group of people dancing casually to music with a more or less strong and steady beat, or B.) People carrying out a totally choreographed and rehearsed routine that's repeated in every performance, also to music with a more or less strong and steady beat.

In Avantopia, "Dance" is thought of as exploring how space, movement, the human body, and rhythm interact, psychologically and emotionally and psychologically. This rhythm often comes from music, but not always; and when it does, it's often music that's rhythmically complicated, irregular, or is in a complex relation to the movement, not always about the downbeat. It's often improvised in the moment, because it tries to activate a *specific* place and time; its skills overlap with Normal traditions like ballet, tap, and (especially) many Asian dance traditions, but it has other skills that lie outside their scope. Butoh is a particularly intense practice started in Japan, incorporating Japanese theatre, dance, and various European avant-traditions.

Every moment of our lives is spent in human bodies inhabiting *specific* places, in the midst of multiple rhythms and movements – but in Normalcy, nobody thinks consciously about how those factors affect us, and how we could change them for the better. Avant-garde Dance is one way to train ourselves to be more conscious and proactive in how we *move* through the world.

## Music & Noise

Avantopian music is very diverse, and even has a bit of overlap with the weirder fringes of Normal music such as punk, jazz, industrial, metal, ‘classical’ new music, and various electronic genres. Most of it, though, is just as exotic to Normalcy as other Avantopian culture. We’ll just glance at a few things you’re likely to encounter.

In Avantopia, “Music” is often thought of as exploring how sound, time, and human consciousness interact. The kind of regular rhythms and catchy tunes that make up most of Normal music only covers a small fraction of that exploration. Normal music tends to have a strong recognisable and repeated beat that carries us through and might surprise us in pleasant little ways, but will never shock us. Much Avantopian music works differently. Sometimes the rhythms are so complex that listeners can’t assimilate them, leading instead toward a kind of mystical state where experience can’t be grasped by understanding. Sometimes the rhythm may not involve repetition, but is more like whitewater rafting, constantly changing speeds and directions and never seeing the same thing twice, but still somehow a single experience. Sometimes time is manipulated in terms of gradual evolutions or changes of sound rather than rhythm, and sometimes with very simple sounds.

A lot of Avantopian music can be loosely referred to as Free Improvisation or Noise:

### Free Improvisation

To a Normal traveler, Free Improvisation (also called Free Playing) can look simply like people playing random notes (and non-notes). In fact, it’s a matter of people thinking on their feet through music, and is sometimes entertaining, but also always part experiment, part game, and part exploration of the moment and situation. It’s similar in some ways to the prophetic oracles in many ancient societies, or “automatic writing”(see **Poetry**). Normal music typically puts the



player on a certain path to *follow* to produce the song as it was meant to sound; Avantopian improvisation demands that the player make constant *decisions*, never knowing (or usually asking themselves) where they will end up. When it's a collaboration, all of that is being shared socially by the players and all the decision-making gets even more complicated. Historically, it largely originated in Free Jazz, but the elements of jazz that you can still feel in that music are gone.

Don't look for tunes or repetition or anything danceable. Instead, pay attention to how each part of the piece makes you feel, how the tension and intensity rises and draws back, how certain sounds or patterns turn up again in different combinations; when are changes gradual? When are they sudden? Can you predict them? And watch the player/s; especially when they're playing together, *watching* them make decisions is often just as fascinating as the piece itself, like watching people play baseball or poker.

## Noise Music

"That's not music!" is among the most common reactions to most Avantopian electrified **music**; and most of the people making it agree. Normal Music, they point out, is based on repeatable, identifiable *sounds* that almost automatically stand out to us from all the background noise of the world. Musical notes are the most obvious example, but the same thing's true all over; for instance, we usually pick out words in a human voice and automatically "tune out" the noises of the refrigerator, air conditioner, rain, and traffic outside the window. Music (and Free Improv) is focused on these kinds of sounds; but other Avantopians focus on the messy, amorphous world of *noise* that we usually suppress our consciousness of.

The common factors in the genre that's most often called simply *Noise* are that there's no melody and no harmony, the main noises used bear no resemblance to notes, there's no steady rhythm, it's usually improvised, and it *usually* involves a lot of electronic distortion. The

original noise might be machine-generated, or “sampled” (taken from a recording) or might come from a voice or various objects through a microphone (including a “contact mic” that directly picks up the vibrations from an object – a little like a stethoscope – to magnify everyday noises we usually don’t hear). That noise can then be “looped” (a snippet’s recorded and then keeps repeating), its pitch or timbre or many other aspects can be changed (“effects”), it can have reverberation (echo) added, it can be layered with other sounds, and the manipulations done on one layer can be matched with others. This is sometimes done with computers, usually with anywhere from one to twenty pieces of sound-engineering equipment, often combined with computers; many noise artists design and build their own machines. Although it can seem impersonal at first when faced with these machine-noises, the trick is that performers use them to create incredibly organic and non-mechanical effects, finding or putting humanity into the machines. With countless possible source-sounds and hundreds of effects that can be combined in thousands of ways, a huge diversity of noises used to compose. The skill is in keeping all these possibilities at the tips of your fingers and agile – more like being a skilled fencer than a skilled orchestral musician.

So, complaining that “this isn’t music” is a little like going to a baseball game and complaining that this isn’t a cricket tournament. Sure, there are a lot of guys with bats and balls, but they’re two different games. Instead, listen for the same things I’ve suggested with **Free Improv** – the main difference is in the instruments. In terms of that difference, Noise is especially hard to listen to from Normalcy’s perspective because at home you’re focusing on notes, rhythms, and patterns that fit together in a way that “makes sense”. No point looking for that here. Instead, focus on the *textures* of noise, the way that it’s layered and that one noise gradually or suddenly changes because of one of the “effects put on it” by the machines. Also like Free Improv, *watch them do it* – it won’t take long before you realize that they’re making careful decisions every second; the problem, again, is just that Normal ears have been trained *not* to pick up on subtle distinctions of

noise. So if you get bored or frustrated, watch the performer and try to figure out which knob, dial, pedal or button produces which effect on the sound; whether or not you figure it out, you'll start to pick up on the subtleties of the noise.

You might run into two nearly opposite sub-genres of noise in Avantopia:

Ambient Noise is meant to be calming, meditative, minimal, and not necessarily the centre of attention the whole time. The changes might be more subtle, occur over a longer period of time, or less often. It's meant to create a certain state of mind in the place where it's happening, push the guests' thought into areas they would not otherwise end up. Allow your mind to wander, and draw it back in to the performance every so often. You hear it all the time in horror movie sound-tracks, though there's nothing inherently scary about it.

And then there's Harsh Noise. This is exactly what it's name implies. It's concerned with noise as a physical force – *feeling* the sound waves is part of the intended experience. This means that it's very loud, it incorporates very grating noises that may hurt to hear, and usually involves very intense layering of very distorted noises. Some harsh noise is very primal and direct, like the Greek rituals of Dionysos, rejecting subtlety. Other harsh noise is actually extremely subtle and sophisticated, even if it *does* hurt to listen to. You may want earplugs, but you'll miss part of what it's about, just as playing football is about sometimes getting tackled.

## Poetry

Avantopian poetry (surprise surprise) can be pretty disorienting; and as with most Avantopian culture, this is partly intentional, and partly a matter of cultural misunderstanding. Only some of it uses words. It *does* communicate, but not by “telling” you about a thought or feeling; it’s more the way that electric energy is *communicated* through a circuit; and the poet is the conducting-wire.

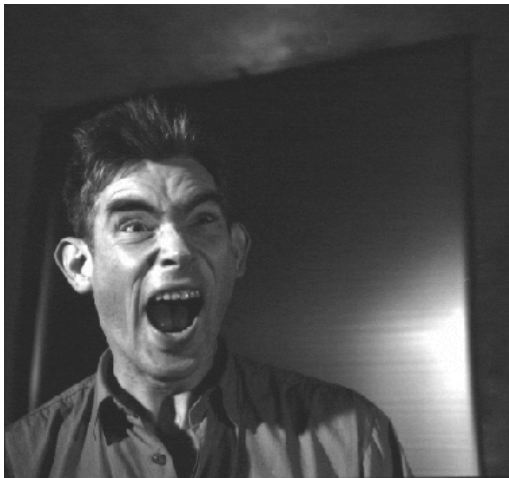
In the realm of Normalcy, “Poetry” is usually assumed to be a tool for conveying an idea or emotion from the poet to the reader/listener. It’s broken up into lines and the writer thinks about sound repetition and rhythm in order to make it sound nicer, make it easier to remember, or emphasize the aspects of the text that make the idea/feeling come through most strongly. But what Avantopians call Poetry is the exploration of how language, rhythm/pattern, and consciousness interact.

Meaning is a part of this, but so are the parts of language *other* than meaning like their sound/sight, rhythm, etc. that we usually “tune out” to concentrate on meaning in Normal life. So, Avantopian poetry involves playing with every level of language, from the sentence down to the letter, and then even *smaller*. It involves a huge range of strategies. Some avant poets use “automatic writing” in which you use various techniques to write without being aware of what you’re writing – letting the subconscious mind speak. Some pattern words or parts of words according to their sound, using them like musical notes. Some design “equations” or sets of instructions that they use to write pieces, sometimes starting from a source text and distorting it (compare this to **Noise Music**). Some start with a word or phrase or quote chosen on a whim or by chance, then “play” with it and/or build from it in various ways. Many poets combine some or all of these and more techniques in complex ways.

As with so much advice on Avantopian culture: don’t come in with expectations, just read or listen and *watch* yourself doing so, and *think* about what it makes you think about or feel, even if you can’t connect

the feeling to the words. It's not that you're "not getting it." It's not about *getting*.

A lot of Avant poetry is meant to be performed live, and some can *only* exist live. Among the latter is Sound Poetry or Phonetic Poetry, which gets rid of meaning completely, or almost completely, and focuses instead on rhythm, sound, and how language relates to the human body. To do this it uses the basic *sounds* of speech as materials to arrange like notes. In a way, it's a merger of music and poetry; the way that repetition and patterning works is largely musical, while the ways it's scored and that its rhythms and intonation are interpreted are largely poetic. There are thousands of scoring methods, and most expect each performer to come up with a different way to read the score, so that each performance of a poem is very unique. A lot of Avantopian sound poetry is essentially one form of their culture's ceremonial chant: using lots of repetition that sometimes induces pleasant meditative or trance states in guests, and always in the poet (see **Religion**). Some go further into what they call Crirhythm or Noise Poetry, which focuses on the sounds that you are *not* supposed to use in speech, is improvisational, and is like a combination of Speaking in Tongues and a poetic version of **Noise Music**.



Jaap Blonk performs sound poetry, c. 1980s

## Performance Art

“Performance” is an even vaguer term in Avantopia than the others we’ve discussed, and is kind of a catch-all for, let’s say, anything highly unusual an Avantopian does in a festive setting while other people watch and *won’t* poetry, music, or dance. It often involves a lot of props and maybe costuming, deliberate but ambiguous movements, actions which feel ritualistic and absurd at the same time. It sometimes involves aspects of Devised Theatre, in which actors inhabit symbolic archetypal characters in plays which have no narrative or setting and involve many overlaps with dance. In the world of Normalcy, this umbrella-category usually called “Performance Art”, but many Avantopians are uncomfortable being associated with “Art” (see **Art & Avantopia**). Because it applies to so many different kinds of things, I’ll keep this brief. When experiencing it, follow the advice that’s popped up repeatedly: don’t expect, and don’t interpret the strangeness as threatening. Ask “what did that make me feel and think about?” rather than “what is that supposed to *mean*?”

## Visual Art Objects

Here too, the range of Avantopian objects that fall under the Normal category of “Art” is so broad that I have to be either too brief or *way* too long-winded, so I’ll go with the first choice. The section “*Art*” and *Avantopia* deals with it quite a bit already; many of these objects (paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc.) serve contemplative or meditational purposes like mandalas and religious objects; many communicate “trans-rationally” from subconscious-to-subconscious, skipping the middle-man of consciousness. Collaboration is much more common than in Normal Art, and there are usually heavier influences from practices that are considered separate in Normalcy. Collage and Assemblage (3-D collage) are particularly popular; the idea is that

what the Normal world rejects and throws out can be transmuted anti-alchemically into new perspectives. “Installations” respond to a space and tries to transform or colour its psychological effect. A lot of Avantopian correspondence gets called “Mail Art” in the realm of Normalcy; Avantopian letters using collage, rubber-stamps, and drawings are traded and added to by the thousands around within a global network of many hundreds of people, so that many Avantopians end up collaborating with people they’ve never heard of, and usually never see a completed “piece”.

## Conversation & Connection

This is more than half the point of any Avant-festival worth its salt.

You might have noticed that all the Avantopian activities that we’ve discussed are trying to explore some aspect of social and personal consciousness, to make us pay more attention to it, think better about it, and transform how we relate to it. The time *afterward* is when the guests live in the atmosphere that’s been created, let the experience slowly sink in, gradually digest what’s happened, and *talk to each other*. It doesn’t necessarily matter whether they talk explicitly about what’s just happened; the whole atmosphere has been charged with the intensity of something that’s *outside* of the normal, outside the predictable, and with whatever specific effects the performer has brought into being, and it infuses whatever happens. If there is indeed any kind of magic occurring at Avantopian festivals (see **Religion**), much of the effect takes the form of new friendships, collaborations, ideas, and exchanges of skills and knowledge that bear the special intensity of the shared experience that gave them birth.

June 2019

A.Da. 103 / A.H. 189



*AfterMAF 2019 edition*

mOnocle-Lash Anti-Press

[monoclelash.wordpress.com](http://monoclelash.wordpress.com) / [monoclelash@gmail.com](mailto:monoclelash@gmail.com)